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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of research conducted on the perceptions of college and university presidents relative to the perceived impact of the institutional research office on institutional effectiveness at their respective institutions. A national survey of 485 college and university presidents resulted in 261 responses. The survey focused on presidents' perceptions of effectiveness of some of the basic activities central to institutional research, planning, and assessment. Among these activities were: reporting of data to internal and external constituents, institutional planning support, student need and opinion evaluation, academic program planning and assessment, enrollment projection and analysis, and student learning outcomes assessment. Institutional research units were also evaluated relative to the degree to which they were reactive versus proactive, provided timely and accurate data and information, demonstrated understanding of data and information needs of campus decision makers, and the degree to which the president relied on the institutional research unit. (Contains 11 references.) (Author)

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Does Institutional Research Really Contribute to Institutional Effectiveness?: Perceptions of Institutional Research Effectiveness as held by College and University Presidents

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Jean Endo
Editor
AIR Forum Publications

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the results of research conducted on the perceptions of college and university presidents relative to the perceived impact of the institutional research office on institutional effectiveness at their respective institutions. This investigation focuses on the presidents' perception of effectiveness of some of the basic activities central to institutional research, planning, and assessment. Among them, reporting of data to internal and external institutional constituents, institutional planning support, student need and opinion evaluation, academic program planning and assessment, enrollment projection and analysis, and student learning outcomes assessment. Institutional research units were also evaluated relative to the degree to which they are reactive vs. proactive, provided timely and accurate data and information, demonstrated understanding of data and information needs of campus decision makers, and the degree to which the president relied on the institutional research unit.

Overview

A cursory examination of the institutional research literature reveals a wealth of material addressing the institutional research professional's self-perceived impact on institutional effectiveness. Nedwek and Neal (1994), Harrington (1994), Meredith (1994), Matier (1994), and Clagget and Huntington (1993) have cited the place and importance of institutional research on institutional well-being and in the assessment of institutional effectiveness. Saupe (1989), Taylor (1990), and Nichols and Wolfe (1990) have argued additionally that to this end, institutional research should play a prominent role in the assessment of student learning outcomes and educational effectiveness. However, little purposeful research focuses exclusively on the perceptions of the institution's chief executive officer. Regardless of the location of the institutional research office in the organizational hierarchy, it is the college or university president that ultimately determines the role, function, and context of institutional research and planning activities in organizational management and strategic planning.

The depth and breadth of activities undertaken by institutional research offices are likely to differ, as dictated by individual circumstances such institutional size, mission, location of the office in the organizational hierarchy and locus of control (Chen, 1992), (Harrington, Knight, and Christie, 1994), (Harrington and Chen, 1995).

The functional activities of institutional research cover a vast array of topics which typically touch upon nearly every corner of the academy. Examples of such efforts include studies conducted on enrollment management, retention, student and alumni opinion, budget development and deployment, operational and strategic planning support, academic program

review, evaluation of instruction, and facility utilization. Institutional research provides data and information in support of reporting requirements for internal and external institutional constituents. Institutional research engages in environmental boundary scanning activities, which serve as effective early warning systems to alert institutional decision makers of impending institutional vulnerabilities. The recent explosion of information technology has greatly enhanced the timeliness, utility, and usefulness of such activities.

The degree to which institutional research has a direct impact on issues of institutional governance and planning is based largely on the location of the office in the organizational hierarchy (Volkwien, 1989), (Chen, 1992), (Harrington, Knight, and Christie, 1994), and (Harrington and Chen, 1995). The location of the office in the organizational structure affects its ability to function effectively, influence the nature of institutional research activities undertaken, and determine the importance and impact on the institution's decision support system. Given this assertion to be accurate, the authors conducted a study of college and university presidents to determine the degree to which the perceptions of institutional research practitioners, and those of university presidents, converge on issues of the effectiveness of institutional research activities in strategic and operational planning, and assessment. The results of this study provide an overview of the perceived effectiveness of institutional research activities by institutional type and location of the institutional office in the organizational hierarchy.

Methodology

In early January 1996, the authors mailed surveys to a random sample of four hundred eighty five (485) college and university presidents. The survey response rate was 53.9% (261 respondents). The survey instrument elicited demographic data on institutional control (public vs. private), institutional type, Fall 1995 enrollment, FY96 institutional budget, the tenure in length of years of the principle institutional research officer, and the individual to whom the institutional research office reports. Data were collected relative to degree to which the institutional research office is perceived as reactive or proactive, the degree to which the IR office *should* be reactive or proactive, how frequently the president relies on the Institutional research office, presidential expectations of institutional research, and the perceived effectiveness of the institutional research activities of general institutional data reporting, institutional research studies, strategic planning, and student learning outcome assessment activities.

Characteristics of the Respondents

Geographic Location of Respondents

Survey responses were submitted from 47 U.S. states, including Alaska and Hawaii. The largest number of responses came from presidents at colleges and universities in New York (28), followed by Texas (15), Pennsylvania and Florida (12 each), and California (11). It is asserted by the researchers that the number of responses from each state represent the opinions and perceptions of college and university presidents in general.

Type and Control

Data were collected on institutional type (two-year, four-year, university) and control (public vs. private). The largest number of respondents (31.4%) are presidents of public universities. Presidents of four-year private institutions accounted for 24.1% of all respondents. The fewest responses came from presidents of private two-year institutions (2.0%).

Size

Instiutional size was determined by fall semester or quarter student enrollment. The mean Fall 1995 headcount enrollment for all respondent institutions was 9,613. Public universities had the largest mean enrollments at 18,621, while private two-years institutions had the smallest mean fall headcounts at 439.

Operating Budget

The mean fiscal year 1996 operating budget for all institutional respondents was $ 176.9 million. Public universities budgets average $475.7 million, followed by private universities at $ 116.2 million. Public two and four year institutions indicated budgets of $ 27.5 and $ 28.9 million respectively. Private two-year institutions had mean annual operating budgets of $ 1.6 million.

Centralization and Locus of Control of Institutional Research

In part, the authors desired to determine the degree to which the institutional research function at U.S. colleges and universities is centralized and the locus of control for the unit. Of the four hundred eighty-five institutions surveyed, 77% responded that they had a centralized institutional research office on campus. There is a modest correlation between institutional type and the centralization of institutional research; the larger the institution (four-year -> university) the greater the likelihood that the institutional research function is centralized.Of those acknowledging a centralized office, nearly half (45.9%), of the institutional research professionals report to a Vice President for Academic Affairs. Universities and four-year institutions typically have a larger proportion of their institutional research professionals reporting to a Vice President for Academic Affairs, whereas institutional research professionals at two-year institutions most frequently report directly to the institution's president.

Proactive vs. Reactive Institutional Research

A central focus of the research project was to ascertain presidential perception of the degree to which the institutional research unit is aggressive in matters of internal and external environmental boundary scanning activities in support of college planning and decision making needs for data and information. Respondents were asked to identify whether they perceived their institutional research offices as proactive or reactive in responding to various institutional needs. Half of the individuals responding (50.3%) indicated that they perceived their institutional research offices as reactive. A greater percentage of presidents at public universities perceived their institutional research offices are reactive than did presidents of four-year and two-year

institutions. Presidents of public institutions perceived their institutional research offices as less proactive than those offices in private institutions. A greater percentage of institutional research practitioners reporting directly to the institution's president were perceived as more proactive, than those that reported elsewhere in the organizational hierarchy. Institutional research professionals reporting to a Vice President for Academic Affairs were more likely to be perceived as reactive than their peers reporting to other campus leaders. When asked whether they preferred their institutional research functions to be proactive or reactive, 89.2% indicated a preference for proactive institutional research.

Reliance on Institutional Research

The authors postulate that the perceived effectiveness of the institutional research unit on a given college or university campus is largely dependent upon the degree to which the institution's chief executive officer relies on the unit for data and information support. College and University presidents were asked to indicate the degree to which they relied on their institutional research units for support. Of those responding to the survey, more than half (53.4%) indicated that they relied "often" on their institutional research unit. Presidents of universities relied more heavily on their institutional research unit, than did their peers at four-year or two-year institutions. Fewer than seven percent (7%) of all respondents indicated that they "rarely" or "never" relied on their institutional research staff. Institutional research staff reporting directly to the institutions president were relied upon more heavily than their colleagues who reported elsewhere in the institution's leadership structure.

Length of Service

The authors theorize that the degree to which an institutional research unit is effective, is in part attributable to the institutional researcher's familiarity with the institution and the environmental context in which it operates. In assessing the perceptions of presidents regarding institutional research, we also collected data on the number of years of institutional service held by institutional researchers. The mean years in service for all institutional research professionals was 6.07. Institutional researchers at public four-year institutions have the longest tenure at 9.18 years, followed by those at public universities at 6.93 years. The shortest tenure is found at private four-year institutions, where instiutional research professionals have been in their current positions for four years. Institutional research officers reporting to a Vice President for Academic Affairs had the longest tenure at 6.97 years. Institutional Research staff reporting to a Vice President for Planning had the shortest tenure at 4.36 years.

Presidential Expectations of Institutional Research

A section of the survey instrument was devoted to collecting data related to presidential expectations of their institution's institutional research function. Seven specific areas were addressed: the importance of assignments, accuracy of data and information, timeliness and relevance of data and information, analysis and interpretation of data, conclusions and recommendations accompanying institutional research reports, experience of institutional research staff, and the ability of institutional research staff to understand the information needs of campus decision makers.

Assignment of Tasks

Two-thirds of the presidents responding to the survey indicated that the tasks they assign to the institutional research office at their institution are extremely important. Presidents at two-year and four-year institutions placed greater importance on tasks assigned to institutional research than did their peers at universities. The importance of tasks and institutional type were negatively correlated; the larger the institution, the less importance placed on tasks assigned to the institutional research office. Significant relationships were found between the importance placed upon tasks assigned by an institution's president and their reliance on the instiutional research unit. The more frequently the president relies on the institutional research office, the greater importance placed upon the tasks assigned. [ANOVA df(main) = 3, df(within) = 194, (F = 7.8864, sig. = .0001]

Accuracy and Integrity of Data

Among college and university presidents, 96% either agreed, or agreed strongly that their respective institutional research offices provided accurate data and information. Presidents of four-year institutions indicated greater satisfaction with the accuracy of institutional research data than their peers at either two-year colleges or universities. Only four percent of presidents were not satisfied with their institutional research office's ability to provide accurate data. There is a modest correlation between president's satisfaction with the accuracy of data and the degree to which the institutional research office provides proactive decision and planning support . The more proactive the institutional research office, the greater the president's confidence in the reliability and validity of institutional data. Significant relationships were found between the

perception of accuracy of data by college presidents and their reliance on the instiutional research unit. The more frequently the president relies on the institutional research office, the greater confidence placed in the accuracy and integrity of data provided by the instiutional research office. [ANOVA F = 6.8319, df(main) = 3, df (within) = 194, sig. = .0002]

Timely and Relevant Information Support

Presidents were asked to rate their level of agreement with the statement "Proactively, the institutional research office offers timely, relevant information". The majority of respondents (49.4%) indicated general agreement with the statement. Nearly one-third agreed strongly. One in five college or university presidents either disagreed, or disagreed strongly with the statement of timely and relevant information support. Presidents of universities were likely to be critical of the information support offered by their institutional research offices. Chief executive officers of 4 year colleges indicated greater levels of satisfaction with the timeliness and relevancy of information support provided by their office of institutional research than were their colleagues. There is a modest correlation between president's satisfaction with the timeliness and relevancy of information support and degree to which the institutional research office provides proactive decision and planning support . The more proactive the institutional research office, the greater the president's confidence in the timeliness and relevance of institutional data and information. A modest correlation exists also between satisfaction with the timeliness and relevance of information support and the level of reliance placed upon the institutional research office by the president. The greater the reliance placed upon the institutional research office by the institution's president, the greater the level of his or her satisfaction with the timeliness and

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relevance of the data and information. Significant relationships were found between the perception of providing proactive and relevant data and information to the institution's president and their reliance on the instiutional research unit. The more frequently the president relies on the institutional research office, the greater confidence placed on the timeliness and relevance of data provided by the instiutional research office. [ANOVA F = 17.5607, df(main) = 3, df (within) = 192, sig. = .0000]

Analysis and Interpretation of Institutional Data and Information

When asked if they expected analyses and interpretations to accompany institutional research reports, ninety percent of the respondents indicated that they did expect such. Ten percent of the respondents indicated that they did not expect analysis or interpretation of institutional research reports. Presidents of universities and two-year colleges had greater expectations for analysis and interpretation of reports, than did presidents of four-year institutions.

Recommendations for Institutional Action

Although presidents of colleges and universities have a high level of expectation for analyses and interpretation of institutional research reports and studies, nearly one-third do not expect or require recommendations to accompany institutional research reports. Twenty-nine percent of the respondents articulated an urgency for recommendations to accompany reports. Presidents of universities typically had a greater expectation for recommendations for institutional

action to accompany institutional research reports. Presidents of four-year institutions indicated the least need for such institutional research support.

Understanding Information Needs of Campus Decision Makers

Presidents were asked to assess the degree to which institutional research practitioners on their campuses understood the information needs of key campus decision makers. Presidents of two -and four-year institutions indicated a greater level of satisfaction with the level of understanding exhibited by their institutional research professionals, of the data and information needs of key campus decision makers. Presidents of universities responded less enthusiastically. Modest correlations were found between the degree to which the institutional research office was proactive, the degree to which the president of the institution relied on the office, and the level of understanding campus decision support needs. Presidents viewed those proactive offices on which they relied heavily, as being more attuned to the data and information support needs of campus decision makers. Significant relationships were found between the president's perception of the degree to which their institutional research unit thoroughly understands the information needs of campus decision makers and the president's reliance on the instiutional research unit. The more frequently the president relies on the institutional research office, the greater the confidence placed in the units understanding of information needs of decision makers.

[ANOVA F = 9.4429, df(main) = 3, df(within) = 192, sig. = .0000]

Assessment of Institutional Research Effectiveness

The third section of the survey solicited presidential perception of the effectiveness of the institutional research unit relative to student learning outcomes assessment, reporting to external and internal constituents, strategic planning support, the ability to gauge student opinion, academic program assessment and planning, enrollment projection and analysis, evaluating instructional effectiveness, and conducting space and facility utilization reports and studies.

Student Learning Outcomes Assessment

One third of president's surveyed perceived their institutional research offices as being very effective in assessing student learning outcomes. Presidents of four-year and two-year institutions were predisposed to perceive their institutional research staff as more effective at learning outcomes assessment than presidents of universities. In regards to locus of control, institutional research staff reporting directly to the institutions president were perceived as more effective than their peers who reported elsewhere. Significant relationships were found between the president's perception of effectiveness in assessing student learning outcomes and the president's reliance on the instiutional research unit. The more frequently the president relies on the institutional research office, the greater the perception of effectiveness. [ANOVA F = 5.6552,

df(main) = 3, df(within) = 182, sig. = .0010]

Data Reporting to Institutional Constituents

College and university presidents perceive their institutional research staffs as very effective in reporting accurate and timely data to internal and external institutional constituents. A greater proportion of presidents at four-year institutions perceived their institutional research staff as more effective in reporting data and information to constituents than their peers at two-year institutions or universities. There is a modest correlation between the degree to which the institution's president relies on the institutional research office and their effectiveness in reporting data and information to institutional constituencies. Institutional research staff who reported to either the institution's president or vice president for academic affairs were perceived as more effective than their peers that reported to other campus administrators. Institutional research officers reporting to a vice president for academic affairs were perceived as more effective in reporting data and information to external constituents, whereas those reporting to the institution's chief executive officer were perceived as more effective reporting data and information to internal constituents. Significant relationships were found between the president's perception of effectiveness in reporting accurate, timely information to institutional constituents and the president's reliance on the instiutional research unit. The more frequently the president relies on the institutional research office, the greater the perception of effectiveness.[F = 5.6552, df(main) = 3, df(within) = 191, sig.=.0010]

Institutional Planning Support

The majority of presidents responding to the survey perceive their institutional research offices as somewhat effective in providing support for institutional planning activities. Nearly one-in-four presidents perceive their institutional research offices as ineffective. Presidents of universities perceive their institutional research offices as less effective in providing institutional planning support than do presidents of two-year and four-year institutions. President's at four-year institutions perceive their institutional research offices as more effective than their peers. There is a correlation between the perceived effectiveness of institutional planning support and the degree to which the institution's president relies on the instiutional research staff, as well as the degree to which the institutional research office is proactive. The more proactive and relied upon, the greater the perceived effectiveness in planning support. Institutional research staff reporting to a vice president for planning were perceived by college and university presidents as more effective than their peers who reported elsewhere in the organizational hierarchy. Significant relationships were found between the president's perception of effectiveness in strategic planning support, the president's reliance on the instiutional research unit, and institutional type. The more frequently the president relies on the institutional research office, the greater the perception of effectiveness in planning support. [ANOVA F = 5.9660, df(main) = 3, df(within) = 185, sig. = .0031]. Presidents of two-year institutions placed greater confidence in their instiutional research office's effectiveness in strategic planning support than did presidents at four-year colleges and universities. [ANOVA F = 12.9831, df(main) = 2, df(within) = 186, sig. = .0013].

Student Need and Opinion Evaluation

Presidents of two-year institutions perceive their institutional research professionals as more effective in monitoring and evaluating student need and opinion than do presidents of four-year institutions and universities. Nearly one-third of university presidents perceive their institutional research staffs as ineffective. Modest positive correlations exist between the degree to which the institutional research office is proactive and effective in student learning outcomes, and president's perceived effectiveness in monitoring and evaluating student need and opinion. Institutional research staff reporting to an institution's president were perceived as more effective in monitoring and evaluating student need than those reporting to either vice presidents of academic affairs, planning, student affairs, or business affairs. Significant relationships were found between the president's perception of effectiveness in gauging student opinion, the president's reliance on the instiutional research unit, and institutional type. The more frequently the president relies on the institutional research office, the greater the perception of effectiveness in monitoring student opinion and need. [ANOVA F = 3.4145, df(main) = 5, df(within) = 176, sig. = .0187]. Presidents of two-year institutions placed greater confidence in their instiutional research office's effectiveness in strategic planning support than did presidents at four-year colleges and universities. [ANOVA F = 4.6017, df(main) = 2, df(within) = 179, sig. = .0113].

Academic Program Assessment and Planning

Seventy-five percent of college and university presidents perceive their institutional research staffs as effective in conducting academic program assessment and planning activities on campus. Presidents of two-year institutions perceive their institutional research staff as more

effective than do either presidents of four-year colleges or universities. There are correlations among the degree to which the institutional research office is proactive, relied upon, effective in reporting data and information to internal and external constituents and effective providing institutional planning support, and their perceived effectiveness in assisting in academic program assessment and planning. President's whose institutional research staff reported to either the vice president for academic affairs or directly to the president, were perceived as more effective than their colleagues reporting elsewhere. Significant relationships were found between the president's perception of effectiveness in academic program review and planning, the president's reliance on the instiutional research unit, and institutional type. The more frequently the president relies on the institutional research office, the greater the perception of effectiveness in academic program review and academic planning. [ANOVA F = 2.8246, df(main) = 3, df(within) = 177, sig. = .0176]. Presidents of four-year institutions placed greater confidence in their instiutional research office's effectiveness in strategic planning support than did presidents at four-year colleges and universities. [ANOVA F = 7.3007, df(main) = 3, df(within) = 182, sig. = .0001].

Enrollment Projection and Analysis

Institutional research activities of enrollment projection and analysis were perceived as effective by half of the presidents surveyed. Twenty percent indicated the their staffs were ineffective in such endeavors. Presidents of four-year colleges perceived their institutional research staffs as more effective at enrollment projection and analysis than presidents at either two-year institutions or universities. There is a correlation between the degree to which the

institutional president relies on the instiutional research office, the degree to which the institutional research office is effective in institutional planning activities, the degree to which the institutional research office is effective in providing data and information support to internal institutional constituents, and president's perceived effectiveness of institutional research in providing enrollment projections and accompanying analyses. Institutional research staff reporting directly to a vice president for planning were perceived as most effective in support enrollment projections and analyses. Significant relationships were found between the president's perception of effectiveness in developing useful enrollment projections and the president's reliance on the instiutional research unit. The more frequently the president relies on the institutional research office, the greater the perception of effectiveness and utility.

[ANOVA F = 7.8872, df(main) = 3, df(within) = 181, sig. = .0001]

Assessment and Evaluation of Instruction

Fewer than ten percent of the college and university presidents surveyed perceived their institutional research offices as very effective in the assessment and evaluation of instruction. Forty-percent of the respondents indicated that their institutional research offices were somewhat effective. Presidents of two-year institutions perceived their institutional research office as more effective than did presidents of four-year colleges and universities. Despite convention, institutional research staff reporting to a vice president for academic affairs were perceived as less effective at evaluating instruction than those reporting directly to the institution's president.

Expectations of Institutional Research

TABLE 1

Presidential Expectation	Item Mean Rating[1]	Agreement Index[2]
Importance of Tasks Assigned	3.586	98.0
Accuracy of Data	3.460	95.5
Timely, Relevant Data/Information	3.071	80.1
IR Has Great Deal of Experience	2.984	76.7
IR Understand Information Needs	2.898	71.9

[1] Item Mean Rating - mean rating obtained from use of a 4 point likert-type scale to ascertain expectation measure (4 = strongly agree, 1 = strongly disagree).

[2] Agreement Index - measure indicates the percentage of all respondents who indicated "Agree" or "Strongly Agree" with importance of institutional research activity.

Institutional Research Effectiveness Measures

TABLE 2

Institutional Research Activity	Item Mean Rating[1]	Effectiveness Index[2]
Outcomes Assessment	3.043	79.6
Internal Reporting	3.508	91.1
External Reporting	3.505	93.3
Strategic Planning Support	3.016	77.2
Gauging Student Opinion and Need	2.940	73.6
Academic Program Assessment	2.961	74.6
Enrollment Analysis/Projections	3.281	85.4
Evaluation of Instruction	2.416	52.2
Facility Utilization Reporting	2.661	62.1

[1] Item Mean Rating - mean rating obtained from use of a four point likert-type scale to ascertain effectiveness measure (4 = effective 1 = ineffective).

[2] Effectiveness Index - measure indicates the percentage of all respondents who indicated that institutional research activity item as "Effective" or "Somewhat Effective"

Barriers Hindering the Effectiveness of the Institutional Research Function

The final section of the survey solicited presidential perception on possible barriers to the effectiveness of the institutional research function on their campuses. The two greatest perceived impediments to the effectiveness of institutional research professionals were increased government reporting requirements (IPEDS, Student-Right-to-Know,) and lack of institutional financial support for the institutional research unit. Also mentioned frequently were lack of initiation of institutional research professionals, and lack of campus-wide cooperation with the institutional research office.

Summary

The role and function of institutional research are important components to institutional well-being and are critical in monitoring and evaluating institutional effectiveness. Regardless of the nature of institutional control or mission, presidents rely heavily on institutional research to provide data, information, and planning and assessment support. Effective, formal institutional research activities are conducted in virtually every corner of the academe, from student learning outcomes assessment to institutional planning support, and from academic program assessment and evaluation of instruction to student affairs research. Although burdened to provide continuous support to an ever increasing array of internal and external institutional constituencies, institutional research offices continue to be severely understaffed and under-supported budgetarily.

Even though college and university presidents realize the conditions under which their institutional research professionals work, institutional research offices are perceived as less

proactive than presidents would like, although little is done to improve institutional researcher's lot.

College and university presidents perceive a number of barriers to the effectiveness of institutional research, including increased federal and state government reporting requirements and lack of internal financial support for the institutional research unit.

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